

University of Groningen

Sheets-Johnstone, Maxine. The Corporeal Turn

van Mazijk, Corijn

Published in:
PhaenEx

DOI:
[10.22329/p.v9i2.4287](https://doi.org/10.22329/p.v9i2.4287)

IMPORTANT NOTE: You are advised to consult the publisher's version (publisher's PDF) if you wish to cite from it. Please check the document version below.

Document Version
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Publication date:
2014

[Link to publication in University of Groningen/UMCG research database](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

van Mazijk, C. (2014). Sheets-Johnstone, Maxine. The Corporeal Turn: An Interdisciplinary Reader. *PhaenEx*, 9(2), 156-165. <https://doi.org/10.22329/p.v9i2.4287>

Copyright

Other than for strictly personal use, it is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

The publication may also be distributed here under the terms of Article 25fa of the Dutch Copyright Act, indicated by the "Taverne" license. More information can be found on the University of Groningen website: <https://www.rug.nl/library/open-access/self-archiving-pure/taverne-amendment>.

Take-down policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

Downloaded from the University of Groningen/UMCG research database (Pure): <http://www.rug.nl/research/portal>. For technical reasons the number of authors shown on this cover page is limited to 10 maximum.

Corporeal Concepts and Kinetic Semantics

An Encounter With:

Maxine Sheets-Johnstone, *The Corporeal Turn: An Interdisciplinary Reader*, Charlottesville: Imprint Academic, 2009, 380 pages.

&

Recent articles (2012) by M. Sheets-Johnstone

CORIJN VAN MAZIJK

What is “the corporeal turn”? According to Maxine Sheets-Johnstone, it is a broad interdisciplinary development concerning questions, concepts, and relationships that derive from and center on the body and bodily life. Not only does the term make implicit reference to the well-known “linguistic turn” of the first half of the 20th century, but it similarly connotes quite adequately a feel of retrieving. Sheets-Johnstone’s works represent a desire to uncover a more original understanding of and enquiry into life. One of the most praiseworthy features of her 30 years-long philosophical enterprise is its consistent obsession with constructing new perspectives on these issues rather than being involved with the topics as they stand. Consequently, the interdisciplinary reader *The Corporeal Turn* and her recent articles alike are truly works of a philosopher: they explore before giving answers. Unfortunately, this kind of writing has its downsides, since it often cannot provide readymade methods or answers that can be taken over by others.

Sheets-Johnstone’s writings deal with a remarkably wide array of topics within philosophy, biology, cultural studies, and even neuroscience. With a total of nearly 400 pages, *The Corporeal Turn* cannot be said to make many substantial scientific contributions to any of these areas. Its sole purpose is to reconsider how we should look at life prior to engaging ourselves in dogmatic empirical research. This should make Sheets-Johnstone’s work of great importance to any philosopher or scientist interested in first person methodology.

Without pretending to discuss *The Corporeal Turn* and her more recent articles in full detail, I here focus on two themes that I deem the most interesting from an embodied point of view: “corporeal concepts” and “kinetic semantics,” the domains of thought and language

respectively. The first appears to fit neatly the contemporary trend to consider cognitive capacities in relation to the body and the external world—compare, for instance, extended mind theory, the enactive approach, embodied and embedded cognition. Of these “four Es,” Sheets-Johnstone’s approach might be closest to the enactive approach as it is recently spelled-out by Thompson. The important similarity here is the extension of phenomenological thought along the lines of evolutionary biology. What this means is that Sheets-Johnstone applies Husserl’s “lonewolf autophenomenology” (Dennett) beyond its alleged solipsism, thus leading her to revise the very concepts of biological life, semantics and consciousness.

I. Animate Forms and the First Person Perspective

Central to all of Sheets-Johnstone’s writings are the interchangeable concepts “animation,” “aliveness,” or “animate forms.” These terms have an important epistemological function as they denote the objects of description throughout her works. An *animate form* is said to be a living creature from the perspective of its own active, responsive, and dynamic aliveness. The words *animate* and *animation* may be understood as roughly synonymous to the concept of a living body, which in turn stands in the sharpest opposition to objective bodies as described in physical or mechanistic research. Even the biological body, although its description permits that it breathes, moves and the more, is considered an abstraction in that its first person world is stripped from it. The reality described from a biological perspective is an observed rather than a lived presence. This lived presence, although unaccounted for from a mechanical perspective, must nevertheless be assumed by the objective researcher. No matter what kind of a body is being investigated, a lived body must implicitly be taken to underlie it. Contrary to other descriptive concepts, the living body is the one that has been there from birth onwards, and, one might add, it is the one that eventually came to invent the mechanical and biological bodies.

In spite of its apparent indefiniteness, the concept is said to accentuate certain features of life. Animate forms are above all experiencing, responsive, feeling, and moving bodies. In her more recent works, Sheets-Johnstone seems to prioritize movement over feeling, implying that the latter is both contingent as dependent on kinesthesia. In *The Corporeal Turn*, however, these qualities are said together to constitute a primordial dynamic aliveness. This dynamic aliveness points to the combined capacities of feeling and moving in pre-objective, responsive ways. It incorporates such notions as tactility, kinesthesia,¹

¹ The term *kinesthesia* is used to denote the sense a creature has for detecting its own bodily position and the movements of its bodily parts.

sensory-kinetics,² and proprioception,³ all of which correspond to specific characteristics of first-person experience. Sheets-Johnstone thinks that understanding the primacy of dynamics requires that one grasps that for most part, and in a truly non-metaphoric sense, *thinking is movement*. Being a former dance choreographer, she uses dance improvisation as an example to illustrate this. To move creatively in an improvisational dance means to respond to movements of others according to some possible sets of rules. However, in experiencing some particular sharpness in specific body angles of another dancer, one does not perceive or register some “sense data” prior to one’s own responsiveness. Neither is there any “mind-doing” prior to or even separate from a body-doing. Rather, qualities and presences of the other dancer are kinesthetically felt and absorbed smoothly and directly into one’s own corporeal aliveness. It would in fact be improper to speak of objective notions such as sense data in considering these primitive, bodily interactions. According to Sheets-Johnstone (see her recent paper “From Movement to Dance”), the case of dance improvisation is but unique: it represents a typical and universal mode of first person aliveness shared by all animate forms. It illustrates the dynamic and immediately meaningful environment in which animate forms are always already engaged and with which they form a dynamic unity.

Two additional examples may help to illustrate Sheets-Johnstone’s radical thesis in which movement and thinking are equated: the Husserlian notion of if/then-relationships and the (also Husserlian) passive explication of objects through typical familiarity (Husserl, *Experience and Judgment* 103-148). Sheets-Johnstone says that if/then-relationships are essentially pre-linguistic but nevertheless conceptual understandings of relationships. This combination is somewhat unusual and can really only be maintained by broadening our notion of conceptual thinking beyond our typical—and similarly beyond Husserl’s—usage of it. Perhaps it would be more faithful to Husserl’s intentions to say that the pre-constitution of the logical structure of the conditional essentially does not require any logical capabilities. An if/then-relationship as pre-linguistically and pre-predicatively constituted may take the shape of something like: “if I move my face toward this glass of water, I will be able to drink it.” This particular relational apprehension—and also the silently achieved passive explication of the glass of water as an object of perceptual experience—may count as essentially non-linguistic. The activity does not require any “mental activity” but is said to count as thinking nonetheless, as a “kinetic bodily logos” (Sheets-Johnstone,

² *Sensory-kinetics* points to the functional unity of sense perception on the one hand, and movement of one’s own body, on the other.

³ *Proprioception* means a sense for what is one’s own.

Corporeal Turn 33-34, 53-59), involving kinesthetic participation in a dynamic environment and proprioceptive knowledge of one's own body. It is this living and thinking body that can form the basis for any kind of "post-kinetic" symbolism, i.e., language. Thinking, it is thus argued, is essentially a matter of movement, not of (human) language, and as a result it is not restricted to the mental.

II. Animate Evolution, Corporeal Concepts and Kinetic Semantics

It is an essential part of Sheets-Johnstone's project that it combines the phenomenological views on the proper descriptive concept for life with an acceptance of the validity of empirical history. By the introduction of a historical dimension, the notion of animate forms is significantly enriched. It might seem as if our understanding of the behavior of animate forms would be led wrongly into the direction of third person research. However, taking the course of the historical development of life into account does not imply that the subject matter would be reduced to mere mechanisms in the theory of evolution. Rather, it means we ought to reconsider the very meaning of evolution as a natural process.

The importance of Darwinian evolution for a phenomenology of existential forms can be illustrated by means of Sheets-Johnstone's concept of "existential fit." For the early Merleau-Ponty, evolutionary continuities between human and non-human animals are located in and thereby restricted to certain "vital categories." These categories are understood as fundamental biological dimensions, such as desiring food or sexual reproduction. According to Sheets-Johnstone, reducing evolutionary continuities to a mere set of vital categories will ensure the unique position of human beings on evolutionary scales. This in turn leads to implicit discontinuities in evolutionary thinking. Merleau-Ponty allegedly fails to be concerned with the unique adaptation of animals to their environment. For him, eating is a vital category and as a result, all eating is always plain eating—regardless of the fact that a chimp might eat more than a gorilla but less than a human. Consequently, these differences within the vital categories are held irrelevant for evolutionary differences in degree. To put it differently, by downgrading evolutionary continuities to supposed vital categories of which the exact structure is unimportant, Merleau-Ponty would neglect the unique existential fit each creature has to its environment and implicitly allow for a superior status of mankind. The notion of existential fit might help to overcome this conceptual gap by paving the way for a new understanding of evolutionary history.

Sheets-Johnstone thinks a natural history of animate forms should begin with the most primordial faculty of animate dynamics, namely with surface sensitivity—the sensate faculty intrinsic to all animation at all times. The importance of surface sensitivities simply cannot be

overestimated: it is through it that the most primary tactile-kinesthetic engagements with the world take place. As with Aristotle, it is through touch only that meaningful affectivities become immediately manifest without mediation. Through pressure, sensate contact deforms animate forms. External proprioceptors are said to be the most basic surface organs responsible for a creature's ability to know that it gets deformed. This corresponds to empirical observations of hydrozoa or polyps. These formal deformations and the creature's subsequent responsiveness—that is, its feeling and moving—take central stage in the evolution of consciousness.

Proprioceptive knowledge through deformations constitutes what the author calls a “meta-corporeal consciousness” which may even apply to protozoa.⁴ Sheets-Johnstone thinks there is no reason not to speak of the cognitive abilities of a unicellular bacterium: “cognitive capacities cannot reasonably be reserved only for what are commonly termed higher-order organisms” (*Corporeal Turn* 161). From the perspective of a natural history of animate forms, a bacterium's ability to know certain chemical properties of its surroundings and thereby to know whether it should move or not, count as genuine meta-corporeal knowledge.

Using impressive amounts of biological data, Sheets-Johnstone attempts to further support the thesis that consciousness is essentially a corporeal phenomenon grounded in movement. She suggests that the external proprioceptors of simple animate forms used for acquiring basic corporeal knowledge through bodily deformations might have evolved toward internal sensors in more advanced animate forms, such as we find in lobsters and spiders (140). From basic tactility in protozoa, kinesthesia gradually evolved further and from there advanced into sensitivity to movement through internally mediated systems of corporeal awareness. Despite these changes, two constant factors remain throughout these evolutionary developments. Firstly, the primacy of surface sensitivity with regard to a creature's kinesthetic abilities, and secondly, the shared goal this serves in all animate bodies: a basic movement-sensitive corporeal consciousness. The reality of our own selves, thus perceived, is rooted in this bodily consciousness. To focus on a natural history of animate forms means to reconsider consciousness in its evolutionary context—not as humanly privileged, but as a bodily phenomenon.

This historical overview may seem to make its points too hastily. It is hard to conceive of the possibility to trace all those elements we ordinarily conceive of as constituting human consciousness—e.g., thought, concepts, intelligence, and awareness—to the dynamics of sense and movement. A brief example might again help to illustrate how Sheets-

⁴ Protozoa are a phylum of organisms within the kingdom of protista. They are typically unicellular organisms, often with locomotive abilities.

Johnstone thinks this to be possible. We ordinarily consider concepts such as weight only with respect to their objective use. For instance, we use it to numerically express a particular objective property of a given object or in roughly weighing something in our hands in order to thematically apprehend the approximate weight of an object. However, this thematic activity of consciously weighing something and the objective expression often related to this are really only exceptional cases. We should first notice that the experience of smoothness, softness, weight, heat, distance, and so forth occur prior to the corresponding linguistic expressions and similarly before being intentionally thematized. These concepts are an integral part of our bodily life—of our own lives, but also of infants yet unable to speak and of non-human animals. To experience smoothness or roughness does not require the acquisition of language skills, that is to say: they are corporeal concepts.

In spite of the capacity for corporeal concepts, most animate forms obviously do not attain language during the course of their lives. They do, however, have their own meaningful worlds with particular regularities, variations, and daily interactions with other animate forms. All such modes of structuring are in a general sense referred to by Sheets-Johnstone as corporeal concepts. These primitive, unthematic concepts such as insideness, thickness, near, far, journey, balance, orientation, and force are the necessary condition for a conceptual language (221). To stress their strong embodiment, Sheets-Johnstone also calls them “archetypal corporeal-kinetic forms.” Whether we hold these archetypes to be actual concepts or not is a matter of terminology. Sheets-Johnstone, however, thinks it necessary to call them conceptual as she would otherwise support a metaphysical gap between semantics and movement and thus implicitly favor evolutionary discontinuities.

Corporeal concepts and archetypal corporeal-kinetic forms are bodily concepts that structure the perception of animate forms. In order to build her way up toward symbolic semantics, an intercorporeal, pre-semantic communication is required. The long and somewhat unattractive term “species-specific/tactile-kinesthetic possibilities and invariants” is to fill the gap (225). According to Sheets-Johnstone, animate forms of the same species share a more or less similar living body with comparable archetypal corporeal-kinetic forms. Not just their experiences of the world are alike: their very own bodies are to a high degree similar. The fact that these creatures have such similar bodies means that they also have shared tactile-kinesthetic possibilities: that is, they act upon their worlds in a similar way, utilizing the same resources and acting similarly upon possibilities present to them. In these shared tactile-kinesthetic possibilities we now find the very foundation for intercorporeal communication. Given one’s own corporeal concepts and tactile-kinesthetic possibilities and given the fact that other creatures share these

in highly similar ways, a first foundation can be laid for a *kinetic semantics*.

Kinetic semantics requires a making co-present of meaning. Sheets-Johnstone writes: “species-specific/tactile-kinesthetic possibilities and invariants are the foundation of our capacity to apperceive what is not present” (226). Indeed, apperception, in the Husserlian tradition of phenomenology, is the ability to perceive what is not directly present. A common example is the perception of a table which one grasps as a single persisting object when walking around it. The crux here is that even though the table is always at any instance perceived from only one angle, it is understood as a whole at any of those instances. In other words, the table’s other sides are made co-present in perception. Analogously, in order to grasp symbolic or iconic meaning, the ability to apperceive something more than is actually given seems an absolute necessity. Sheets-Johnstone thinks an intercorporeal understanding is based on a combination of apperception with species-specific/tactile-kinesthetic possibilities. For instance, the success of communicating a particular threat display is not dependent on any “translation” of “information” hidden somewhere in the mind of the other creature. As in the dance improvisation analogy, there is no mediation or representation going on here: the threatened creature does not need to infer the meaning of the expression. It is only a common kinetic dynamic grasped immediately on grounds of a shared body and shared knowledge about the world. Facial displays are communicable precisely because they are structured in bodily movement and experiences shared by the relevant animate forms. As Crease justly puts it, the important fact that each of us is a body provides us with a fundamental and unsurpassable commonality.

III. Discussion

Sheets-Johnstone’s point of departure seems to be essentially Husserlian: every objective description of the body must already assume a subjective correlate of lived experience in which the objective description and the object itself to which it pertains are constituted (Husserl, *Ideas* 105-112). However, theoretically speaking, things are bound to get more complicated in at least two ways. First, Sheets-Johnstone applies phenomenology to creatures that I myself am not. Second, she uses empirically yielded data to support and even justify the primacy of the living body, while paradoxically holding that the former is the invention of the latter. This second problem points to the somewhat obscure relation between empiricism and phenomenological analyses in her works. A further exploration of this relation is required if one wishes to clarify the phylogenetic development of structures of phenomenal consciousness

which we take to be foundational to our own mental and linguistic capacities.

To start with the first problem: I was quite surprised to notice that, in discussing this topic with friends and colleagues, there was an almost unanimous skepticism toward the possibility of a proper descriptive concept of a life that is not based on a reductive objectivism altogether. The dominant line of reasoning appeared to be the following: one may have access to one's own experiential life, but this does not mean that one can assume the possibility of acquiring knowledge concerning the experience of others. In other words, there seems to be a fundamental difference between looking at objects as objective and subjective respectively, in that the objective object would be unambiguously accessible for me whereas the subjective, intentional being of the object is beyond my experience. Even though this is a common line of reasoning today, I sincerely doubt its validity. Firstly, one could appeal to the fact that the world of one's own subjective experiences, allegedly the most certain, is in fact dependent in all ways on the assumption of the subjective worlds of others. One's own world is essentially determined by one's sensing and moving, but equally by the world's response to this. That others must have experiences like mine is supported by the fact that I would not have had my world the way it is without these subjects having their similar worlds that have co-determined mine in their responsiveness to me. The experiences of the other for the other is thus in a way prerequisite to or co-determinate for my own experiences for me. Secondly, a more technical argument would be that the subjective being of the object I experience consists of apperceptive qualities of that object which are similarly required for constituting the objective object. It could be argued, then, that the subjective and the objective being of an object of my experience hold a very similar validity in their existence for me, since both are to the same extent made possible only on the basis of a complex of apperceptions and horizons.

However, Sheets-Johnstone's recurring argument seems to concern the ontological primacy of the subjective over the objective, which is also reflected in her recent claims on the relation between movement and mirror neurons: "If there were no such thing as corporeal-kinetic tactile-kinesthetic invariants, there would be no mirror neurons" ("Movement and Mirror Neurons" 387). One could argue against this that it is clearly insufficient to merely have a similar body if one is to apperceive the other's emotional disposition in a particular facial display. Indeed, for a genuine apprehension of the other's "state of mind" one needs an understanding in the form of some kind of empathy that exceeds mere intercorporeality. In short, this means that mirror neurons as physiological entities would still have to be presupposed for the actual understanding of the other. I think it is senseless to wage tactile-kinesthetic invariants as

subjective conditions against mirror neurons as objective conditions. The question Sheets-Johnstone has to address does not concern factual origins, for the subjective cannot be factually or empirically prior to the objective: to ask for such foundational relations is to confuse two ontologies. She only has to argue that subjective ontology is necessary for explaining life next to the objective principles of the reductive sciences. In other words, a final explanation of evolutionary developments cannot exist solely of mirror neurons: it has to take the first person perspective into account.

The second problem stated earlier concerns the use of empirical data from evolutionary biology, ethology, and other disciplines for the support of first person descriptions. What methods of inference will ensure that our descriptions of intentional structures, corporeal concepts, and the like will be correct in a domain of existence that cannot be experienced for itself? Even if all animals are indeed animated, this does not yet give us any clues on how to investigate animate forms that we ourselves are not. One could again argue that the subjective being of an object for me is, philosophically speaking, not more obscure than is the objective being of the same object. However, this does not quite weigh up against a whole tradition of objective sciences still dominating today's scientific landscape. It is highly regrettable that Sheets-Johnstone does not discuss these fundamental problems anywhere in her recent works. The relation between empiricism and phenomenology remains opaque while no concrete models, methods, or guidelines for studying the structures of experiences alien to ourselves are being offered. In spite of the seriousness of these objections, I think that we find similar problems in other methods that involve first person data. Sheets-Johnstone faces the same theoretical difficulties as those qualitative research methods based on phenomenology in the areas of psychology and the humanities, such as interpretative phenomenological analysis (see Osborn & Smith) and empirical phenomenology (see Aspers). The only difference is the object of investigation: humans in the case of psychology, and non-humans in biology. These concerns, then, do not at all have to stop us from pursuing this new line of phenomenology. They should, however, be dealt with one way or another.

Guided by our Cartesian instincts we tend to be weary of thinkers like Sheets-Johnstone who transgress the limits of objective science and delve into a new domain of the same reality. As the founder of phenomenology once wrote, we tend to spare ourselves the effort of exploring the new lands by pointing to methodical difficulties from the sideline, neglecting that these and similar problems also occur in one's own field of research. I think Sheets-Johnstone has made some important contributions in her 30 yearlong project focused on the lived dynamics of the body. However, in order to translate the numerous perspectives and ideas into one or more unified methods, much more collaborative research

between phenomenological philosophers and scientists is necessary. Undoubtedly, objective measures reflecting subjective ontology would have to be developed to account for the interactions of animate forms with their environment. Some of the analyses conducted in chapter 7, “Consciousness: A Natural History,” might have a high potential for further elaborations in this direction, but for the most part these paths have yet to be paved. However, if the reader finds it convincing that animation is the appropriate descriptive concept for life, he or she will have to take Sheets-Johnstone’s stepping stones quite seriously, in spite of all possible difficulties.

Works Cited

- ASPERS, Patrick. “Empirical Phenomenology: A Qualitative Research Approach.” *Indo-Pacific Journal of Phenomenology* 9-2 (2009): 1-12.
- CREASE, Robert. P. “Exploring Animate Form: A Review Essay.” (On M. Sheets-Johnstone. *The Primacy of Movement*. 2000.) *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences* 2 (2003): 69-83.
- DENNETT, Daniel C. “Heterophenomenology Reconsidered.” *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences* 6-1/2 (2007): 247-270.
- HUSSERL, Edmund. *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy*, trans. F. Kersten. The Hague/Boston/Lancaster: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 1983.
- . *Experience and Judgment: Investigations in a Genealogy of Logic*. Evanston (IL): Northwestern University Press, 1997.
- OSBORN, Mike & Jonathan A. SMITH. “Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis.” In: *Qualitative Psychology: A Practical Guide to Research Methods*, 2nd ed., Sage Publications Ltd, 2008.
- SHEETS-JOHNSTONE, Maxine. *The Corporeal Turn: An Interdisciplinary Reader*. Charlottesville: Imprint Academic, 2009.
- . “From Movement to Dance.” *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences* 11 (2012): 39-57.
- . “Movement and Mirror Neurons: A Challenging and Choice Conversation.” *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences* 11 (2012): 385-401.
- THOMPSON, E. *Mind in Life: Biology, Phenomenology, and the Sciences of Mind*. Cambridge (MA): Harvard University Press, 2007.